

Webchat with U.S. Embassy Baghdad Spokesperson Philip Frayne

December 2, 2009 12:00 GMT

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Welcome to this special online Q/A session with Embassy Spokesperson Philip Frayne. We are taking your questions beginning at 13:00. Please note: Your question will appear in red once the webchat system has added your question to the queue. There is no need to submit your question more than once. Answers will be posted beginning at 15:00 Baghdad on December 2, 2009.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Welcome to today's webchat. We are now taking your questions.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): As a reminder: If you are representing a media outlet, please identify your organization. Thank you. We'll begin soon.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Welcome to today's webchat session. Mr. Frayne is just getting logged in and we'll then begin. I will post the speech in just a moment.

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Hello Everyone. Thanks for joining me today. Because I'm not a very fast typist, I may not get to all your questions, but I'll try to address as many as I can. Our main topic is President Obama's speech last night unveiling a new Afghanistan strategy, but I'll be happy to address other questions as well. Yalla, let's get started.

Alhaidari Moyad: Yes ,I am a broadcaster and editor with Radio free Iraq -Radio Free Europe ,Thank you How much the new plan of president Obama will effect on the US troop in Iraq , did the plan took in consideration that SOFA may need delay in its agenda because pospondent expected in Iraqi election ?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Moyad, thank you for that question. As President Obama said in his speech last night, he plans to withdraw American combat forces from Iraq by the end of August, 2010, and all U.S. troops out of Iraq by the end of 2011. Our plans to stick to that timetable have not changed. If there is a delay in the Iraqi elections, General Odierno stated recently that he has the flexibility to adjust the pace of the withdrawal, but for the moment, the dates as mentioned above have not changed.

cairousembassy: How US can face violence in both Iraq and Afghanistan and what is the citizen roll in this?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Cairoseembassy: In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. is exerting great efforts to train local Iraqi and Afghan forces to face the security challenges present in both countries. We are capable of deploying forces in both places at the same time, but of course ultimately it will be up to the Iraqis and Afghans to provide for their own security, and that's why we invest so much time and resources into training local police and military forces.

Citizens in America play a large role in the formation of our policies, primarily through discussions with their elected representatives at the national and local level. Of course, if the majority of citizens do not approve of the way a president is conducting our policies, they always have the option of voting him or her out of the White House after 4 years.

mohand alflahy: Do you think that sending 30 thousand additional troops and to withdraw after 2011 Treaty of security, as happened in Iraq will be successful if we consider that the situation in Iraq is not stable so far (mohand alflahy)

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Mohand: President Obama's sending 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, along with the NATO troops already there, will certainly have a much better chance of stabilizing the country and stopping the momentum of the Taliban than if we did not re-enforce our presence there. In Iraq, around the country the situation is much safer and more stable than it was two years ago, despite the large bombings that took place in August and October. We are optimistic that Iraq is on the path to being more secure in the future, and with the increase in the number of Iraqi security forces now capable of providing a safe environment, that path should, insha'Allah, continue after the American withdrawal. With the new plan of increasing the pace of training Afghan forces, by the time we begin our withdrawal in July 2011 there should be a good foundation for Afghans to provide the stability Afghanistan has lacked for so long.

seddiqullah kamran: Why Obama is making this policy now why not eight years before?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Seddiqullah: President Obama just took office last January, not 8 years ago. If by your question you mean why didn't America adopt this strategy 8 years ago, I would refer you to President Obama's speech of last night in which he gave the reasons for the new policy now.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Mr. Frayne continues to review your questions. We ask for your patience as he works on answers, thank you.

Sayed Ebad : Dear participants hello, I am Sayed Ebad from Afghanistan. First of all I thank from those who prepare this event to have discussion on very important issue according new

strategy of president Obama on Afghanistan. As I read the new strategy of US Government for Afghanistan: to send 30000 troops to Afghanistan for 18 months. I have some concern on this issue first as we all know that when the troops come to the Afghanistan off course a very strong and powerful fighting would start between Taliban or Alqaheda members and US troops with help of Afghan National army and National police and at the result of that the Taliban or Alqaheda would skip to Pakistan. So what would be the next step of this strategy regarding this issue? Is there any kind of signed agreement between Pakistan government and US Government to follow up them and arrest or kill them or at least control them to not return back to Afghanistan? If yes, what would be that?? Because as we know and believe that most of the Taliban and Alqaheda members

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Sayed Ebad: That's a lot of good questions! Let me try to answer a few of them. To start from the last part, I think President Obama spoke clearly last night about our strategy to assist Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. To quote him directly: "The United States is committed to strengthening Pakistan's capacity to target those groups that pose the greatest threat to both of our countries. A safe haven for those high-level terrorists whose location is known, and whose intentions are clear, cannot be tolerated. For Pakistan, we continue to encourage civilian and military leadership to sustain their fight against extremists and to eliminate terrorists' safe havens in their country. We are now focused on working with Pakistan's democratic institutions, deepening the ties among our governments and people for our common interests and concerns.

We are committed to a strategic relationship with Pakistan for the long term. We have affirmed this commitment to Pakistan by providing \$1.5 billion each year over the next five years to support Pakistan's development and democracy, and have led a global effort to rally additional pledges of support." As for the issue of civilian deaths, we deeply regret the loss of life of any civilians during military operations. I can tell you in all sincerity that we go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. General McChrystal recently formulated even stricter rules for attacking Taliban elements so that civilian casualties can be further minimized. Unfortunately, when Taliban fighters hide amongst the civilian population, it might not be possible to eliminate all civilian casualties, but we recognize that it is very important we do whatever we can to avoid that.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Please see the Pod to the left for an official transcript of President Obama's remarks. English is now available. I will try to upload the Arabic translation now. To download the file simply click on the file name and the "Save to my Computer"

Peer Mohamed: Why can't Mr Obama who extolled Mahatma Gandhi adopt policy of Ahimsa or dialogue with the Taliban and other Islamist groups?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Hi Peer Mohamed: Actually, President Obama has embarked upon several foreign policies which emphasize dialogue, as with Iran and Syria. The issue in Afghanistan, as Obama said last night, is not allowing al Qaeda space to operate and plan further attacks against the U.S. and other countries. Since the Taliban allowed AQ to do this before, we cannot allow them to take control and give safe haven to AQ again. There's no point in trying to "negotiate" with Al Qaeda. When other groups, Islamist or otherwise, renounce violence and declare themselves ready for peaceful dialogue, I'm sure the U.S. would be prepared to reciprocate.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Hello everyone. The Arabic transcript is now available in the Pod to the left.

nagwa fawzy: i'm Egyptian and greatly my heart hurt for Bagdad why did you aim to destroy its civilization??????????????

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: We did get rid of the awful regime of Saddam Hussein, which completely stifled all freedoms in Iraq and did little to preserve Iraqi civilization. Since 2003, the U.S. has invested in helping Iraq preserve its great cultural heritage. Most recently, for example, we assisted Google in a large project to create a virtual tour of the Iraq National museum so that people around the world can see its treasures.

nagwa fawzy: how do you see Bagdad 's future after Bush's unfair attack?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: We all hope for a brighter future for Baghdad and all of Iraq. We have invested a huge amount of resources and manpower in rebuilding Iraq, and we will be strong partners of the Iraqis for years to come in building a stable, vibrant and democratic country. I hope you get the chance to visit and see for yourself that things are really better than they may seem from reading the local press.

khalid: Are you worried about the potential for delays in the Iraqi elections, and what is your comment on these elections might be delayed to next March instead of January?. Thank you.

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Khalid, Ambassador Christopher Hill has expressed our concern about a long delay in the Iraqi elections. We think the Iraqi people would also like to see elections held as soon as possible. That might not happen by the end of January as originally scheduled, but assuming Mr. Al Hashemi does not veto this version of the elections law, the Independent High Electoral Commission will soon set the date for elections. In the end, it's really up to the Iraqis to decide their political timetable, not the United States.

Moustafa: What are the United States plans to fight drug industries in Afghanistan

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Moustafa: good question. President Obama said last night that we will have a civilian surge to accompany the military one, and we'll also concentrate on strengthening the agricultural sector. Specifically, he said: " Our top reconstruction priority is implementing a civilian-military agriculture redevelopment strategy to restore Afghanistan's once vibrant agriculture sector. This will help sap the insurgency of fighters and of income from poppy cultivation. " Fighting corruption, another important part of the strategy, will also contribute to weakening the drug trade.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Welcome to everyone logged in. As we mentioned earlier, Mr. Frayne is reviewing your questions and he will try to answer as many as he can during this webchat session.

Teri Schultz: Greetings from Brussels, Phil! NATO Sec Gen Rasmussen said this morning that he is confident the allies will send 5,000 more troops (and possibly more) in response to Obama's call for support. Do you think that's going to be a disappointing figure for the U.S.?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Teri, hello. I doubt the figure of 5,000 - and possibly more -- came as a surprise to the U.S. since we've been closely consulting with our allies for weeks now on what they could contribute. And I believe the Europeans are contributing in many other ways -- don't forget, NATO already has nearly 40,000 troops in Afghanistan. So I would imagine the Administration is quite grateful for all their contributions, whether military or civilian.

Inga: If you allow me a second question (I'm with the Swiss newspaper NZZ). The elections in Iraq will have to be postponed. How long can the elections be postponed in order not to jeopardize the planned troop withdrawal? And what would you say are the biggest challenges ahead?

Inga: As President Obama has pledged more troops and resources to Afghanistan and Pakistan, how is this going to effect any commitment to Iraq in terms of military, civilian and financial support?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Inga, Great question. The increase in troops and assistance to Afghanistan will not affect our commitment to Iraq. We have a Security Agreement with Iraq which stipulates that we will pull out all our troops by the end of 2011, and President Obama has said he wants to draw down to approximately 50,000 troops to train and advise the Iraqis by the end of next August. Meantime, we have hundreds and hundreds -- actually, thousands -- of civilian employees here helping the Iraqis on everything

from legal issues to fighting corruption to creating a stronger economy. And we have no intention of reducing our commitment to helping Iraq emerge from some difficult years to become a more stable and prosperous country. So, no, I don't think the new Afghan strategy will lessen our commitment to Iraq's future.

IraqHurr: Sergei Danilochkin, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: Dear Mr. Frayne, President Obama was talking about limits to the US commitment to Afghanistan. He said that the US can not overextend itself economically and get involved in the nation building there. I assume that also may refer to some degree to the situation in Iraq. Is this correct? And where are (or what are) the flagposts of these limitations?

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Sergei, We're focused on helping Iraqis develop the capacity to build their nation themselves. Ultimately it will be up to them to build their institutions and provide for their security. What we can do -- and have been doing for several years -- is assist them with our expertise in many fields and provide the financial and human resources to get started. But we cannot entirely build another nation, and it would be presumptuous of us to think we could.

said Romal saidy: which kind of strategy would you like to make

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: Dear Said, if you read English or Arabic, I would suggest you take a look at the actual speech of president Obama, which gives all the details of our strategy. Thanks.

Philip Frayne - Spokesman, U.S. Embassy Baghdad: I'd like to thank everyone for their interesting questions, and hope we can do this again. Sorry if I missed your question, hope to hear from you again. Eid Mubarak to all our Muslim questioners. bye-bye.

CO.NX Moderator (Mark): Thank you for joining today's webchat. If you would like information on the U.S. State Department's CO.NX webchat program, please write to us at conx@state.gov or visit us at <http://co-nx.state.gov> for a listing of upcoming programs. A transcript of today's session will be posted here shortly. The webchat is now closed.